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MY CREOLES:

A MEMOIR OF THE MISSISSIPPI VALLEY.

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Book VI.

REPARATION AND ABNEGATION.

VII.

SLEIGH-BELLS.

I allowed a whole week to pass without going to The Quarries. My object was to let events shape themselves naturally without arousing alarm or forcing conclusions. Besides, I had promised Gaisso to say nothing of her danger or her flight.

I took advantage of the respite to give Mimi a little more of my company than I had of late been able to do. Those interviews proved particularly from the new light which they shed upon Mimi's character. I found her more demonstrative than usual, more impetuous, more daring. She had formerly been given to railery; now she took pleasure in being sarcastic. She seemed never to tire of chaffing me. There was indeed no poison in her wit; no sting in her epigram. She was hardly more than a gay bird brushing and vexing my cheek with its wing. But the bird was free; it always escaped my hand. It was evident that Mimi was thoroughly happy. All her misgivings had vanished. The pledge I had pronounced was the perch to which, after her flutterings, she ever returned for repose. Her friends were delighted at the change, my mother particularly so. She thanked me for it. Could I do otherwise than partake of the common joy? Certainly not, though sometimes when I saw Mimi at her best, I could not rid myself of the unwelcome thought that perhaps—perhaps all this confidence, all this peace, all this undoubting felicity might be marred by circumstances which neither of us could control, and then I figured to myself how different she would appear under the revulsion. But after all, sufficient for the day is its own burden of evil. I abandoned myself to the pleasure of Mimi's company. I was a willing butt to her merri-ment. I never allowed a selfish or imprudent remark to break in like a false note on the delicious music of her lively motions. And because I was happy she was happier still, and the hours we spent together rolled brightly on golden wheels.

One afternoon I offered her a sleigh-ride. It was the last abundant snow-fall in March, prior to the final breaking up of the winter. Everybody was out to enjoy the parting gift of the season. Mimi eagerly assented to my request. We drove about the city awhile crossing thousands of sleighs in every direction, but with this she seemed only half pleased. It was not brilliant equipages she wanted to see, but the wild wintry scene along the country roads, where the heavy grey line of the sky lies low on the earth, where the rushing winds pile the snow in cliffs along the sides of the lares and gorges. Once more, before the enchanter's spell was dissolved, she wished to see the hazy landscape, the blue smoke curling from indistinct cabins in the valley, the whirled eddies of the snow in the breath of the careering winds; to hear the moan of the forest trees, the loud explosions of the blast like bursts of cannon, the screech of the metal runners, the crunch of the horse-hoofs, the dull tinkle of the sleigh-bells, like echoes from afar. For him who loves the tempest and the mighty elements of God in their angry play, what an afternoon was this to drive across the fields!

Catching the enthusiasm of my companion, I turned my horse's head into the country. By the merest chance, we struck into the Manchester road. Mimi did not notice this at first, but when we passed such well-known landmarks as Camp Spring and the toll-gate, her face kindled with a new joy, and she exclaimed:

"To Valmont, Carey! to Valmont!"

I objected that it was a long drive for a short afternoon, but she insisted so earnestly that I could not refuse. So I cracked my whip over the head of my horse, and away we glided like the wind along the old favorite road.

We were not expected by Aunt Aureole, but she was quite prepared to receive us. When was she ever taken unawares? There were left over from the pastry supplies of Carnival and Mardi-Gras remnants of cakes, braces of pies, plates of croquignolles, bottles of liqueur, pitchers of ayup, to say nothing of the more substantial combinations of fish and flesh. Of course, the first thing we had to do, after warming ourselves, was to eat. And to Aunt Aureole's intense delight we ate heartily. Immediately after the repast, if we had been wise, we should have prepared to return, as the light of day was already waning, but that was impossible with the questionings and prattle of the old people. Uncle Louis took hold of me, made me tell him the news, explain to him my occupations, prospects, and so forth. Aunt Aureole moved about with Mimi from room to room, sat down awhile before the huge log-fire which shed a cheerful light through the apartment, then arose again

and turned out on another excursion through the house.

A great darkness fell suddenly upon us; the wind groaned outside; the window-frames rattled; the large chimney boomed. It was the rising of a snow-storm.

"We must start," said I to Mimi, "before it gets too dark."

"Wait a moment," said Uncle Louis; "we will go out and have a look at the sky."

I followed him to the gallery. We paused to take our bearings. Nothing could be heard save the roar of the tempest among the pines and oaks; nothing could be seen save the driving snow and a few fitful streaks of red mist in the western heavens.

"What time is it?" asked Uncle Louis.

"Ten minutes to six."

The old man went back to the room to consult the sheet calendar which was tacked behind the door. Passing his finger over the month of March till he reached the day on which we were, he said:

"It is the sunset to the very minute."

"Then we must be going," I rejoined.

"A snow-storm beginning at sunset is apt to continue increasing in violence till midnight. It is true that March tempests are capricious. However, I don't think I ought to let you go. It is getting very dark. In half an hour from now there will be no distinguishing earth or sky. And then see how thick and fast the snow falls."

Mimi heard the discourse and seemed not indisposed to remain. When I saw this, I proposed to leave her and return alone. She would not hear of that arrangement. If I stayed, she stayed. If I went, she went. She entreated me to stay. It would be so pleasant to pass one more winter night at dear old Valmont. She made a musical pause on the words *one more*, which went to my heart.

There was only one remaining objection. How were Mimi's parents to know where she was? Uncle Louis answered that by summoning one of his stoutest negro boys whom he ordered to ride into town with a letter from Mimi to her father.

I believe Baptiste would have walked into fire to do either of us a service. He was a stout lad, knew the way perfectly, and the horse he was to ride was one which he had trained to his hand. He was to sleep at Mr. Raymond's and not return the next morning till we had reached the city and seen him.

VIII.

BESIDE THE FROST-BOUND SPRING.

Now that we were safely housed in Valmont for the night, we gathered around the large, open fire and listened to the tempest. What different notes in the trumpets of the wind! What singular noises, as the voices of spirits in pain, circulated through the passage, when the outer doors opened! How the good old building creaked and cracked while Uncle Louis smiled with confidence in the strength of his timbers. Now the sleet lashed the window glasses; then the snow fell softly and silently as wool. It piled up in the avenues, and on the gallery, blocked up the doors, lay like marble tablets on the exterior cements.

We spent a most agreeable evening. Our visit was a delightful relief to the monotony of the old people's life at Valmont. I regaled them with stories. Mimi regaled them with songs. Uncle Louis smoked his red-stone Indian pipe—a sign of high enjoyment. Aunt Aureole darned stockings. Their children sat in between us around the hearth, listening and admiring. Our only light was the immense reflection of the log fire.

But at a sound of the clock the children arose, set the table, lighted the candles and Aunt Aureole, gliding in and out, spread us a supper such as she only knew how to prepare.

I need not rehearse the incidents of this meal, nor of the sitting which succeeded it. At ten o'clock, when we broke up for the night, I went out to inspect the weather. The storm had ceased completely. The wind had fallen. The moon, sailing through an unclouded sky, shed a mantle of silver radiance over the expanses of snow. It was a ravishing spectacle. As I stood gazing in admiration, I was surprised by the appearance of Mimi at my side, wrapped in her fur mantle and hood and shod in her dainty overshoes of beaded moose. Oh! but she was fair, standing pensive on this foreground of dazzling snow, with the white moon overhead.

"Carey," she said in a low voice, "will you come with me?"

"Where do you intend to go on such a night?" I inquired, in simple wonder.

"I am going to the spring. I want to see how it looks after a snow-storm and beneath a wintry moon."

I represented to her the impassable road; the drifts in the glen. She could never wade through the snow.

"But, Carey, are you not my hero? You will break the path; I will follow in your tracks. Besides, there is much of the way that is wind-swept. I am bent on going. If you refuse, I will go alone."

"Oh! you would be afraid to do that?"

"Afraid of what? Not a soul is out on such a night as this. The dryads, which are summer sprites, lie asleep beneath the bark of the trees, and the water-witch has sunk under the fountain in the depths of her thermal caves. They say there are nixies in our winter woods, but as they are all of my sex, I do not fear them. Rather would I be delighted to make their acquaintance."

I shrugged my shoulders a little. This was that irresistible thing, a woman's fancy. I only half liked it, but I must go. What added to my reluctance was that I divined the motive of the visit, which boded no good to me. That spring was very well, shaded with summer flowers, and a foolish boy making love to a pretty girl on its moss-clad margin, but seen now—it was no use arguing, however. I must go.

"Very well, Mimi," I said, plunging into a snow-bank. "Follow me. The sooner we get back the better."

She followed me bravely, laughing and chattering all the way.

"Well, Mimi," I said, when we reached the spring at last, "what have we here, after all, that is worth the trouble we have taken to see it? The face of the fountain is frozen. Its channel is choked with snow. Its sentinel roses are gone, and these are only cracking brambles."

"Ah! Carey, is that all, absolutely all? Can you not picture the scene? Do not all these signs of death and frigidity recall by contrast the time when this fountain was singing its song, when these wild roses shed their fragrance, when this desolate glen was a paradise of beauty for the sweetest and the holiest of loves? Ah! your feet are cold, are they? Your hands are frost-bitten? Then must your heart be chilled. But with me it is far different. My hands, feet, head, heart are on fire. There is no ice on this fountain, no snow in this dell, no death on these branches. I live my brief summer day over again. A basket of flowers is at my feet, the blue-birds are singing in the trees above my head, a voice at my ear pours, as from a golden goblet, the oil of love into my heart. Oh, Carey! but it was a delicious dream. I wished to see the spring once more and in your company. It is the first time I have done so since that day, and it will probably be the last. Come, I am satisfied. Let us return."

Here was precisely the bit of romance which I had expected. How was I to act? Believe myself and join in Mimi's enthusiasm? That I could not do for the life of me. I was perishing of cold. Turn upon the girl with a little banter stolen from her own quiver? I had not the heart to do that either. She was far too beautiful, too true, too deeply earnest in what she had been doing and saying to be so treated. I contented myself with these words:

"Beware, Mimi dear, of what you speak. Some time ago I was accused of neglect and injustice. Take care lest you give some one reason to accuse you of the same. Now that it is done, I am glad to have led you to the spring. If I appeared less anxious to do so, it was because I feared the visit was too much for you to attempt to-night. You may take your death of cold in this hollow, but let it be *sans rancune*. You refused me a kiss at this fountain once before. Make up for it now. Then will I believe in your protestations."

Her head sank upon my shoulder, and we embraced each other there, as only lovers can kiss.

On returning, it was Mimi led the way, following our beaten track, with a cheerful face and elastic gait, hopping as blithely as a snow-bird.

When the old people, who had been wondering where we were gone, heard our story, they laughed heartily. Uncle Louis shook his head, saying to Aunt Aureole:

"We went about things more simply in our time, did we not? We would not freeze our toes for a kiss. In our day kisses were cheaper than they are now, though every bit as sweet. Warm yourselves thoroughly, my children. The mother will give Mimi a glass of mulled wine, while you, Carey, will sit at the fire with me, sipping a Bourbon punch and smoking a pipe."

IX.

PARENTHETICAL.

Was there place in my heart for both Ory and Mimi? Such was the question which occurred to me that night and often afterward. Of course there was so long as love remained in the state of desire. Two such lovers are better than one. It needs no psychological analysis to prove that. It is merely a question of arithmetic. But would I ever be called upon to choose between Mimi and Ory? That was more a delicate puzzle. Sometimes the future of such a choice appeared far away; sometimes it seemed to close in upon me. But far or near, I preferred not to set the alternative too sharply before my eyes. If I did it might prematurely warp my judgment and prepare me for a disappointment which might be the standing sorrow of my life. *Estina lente*.

There was one thing which I observed in this connection and which pleased me exceedingly. Ory and Mimi never clashed in my mind. They were two parallel forces. They were two sisters, walking hand in hand. I never caught myself

comparing them. Does it follow that they presented themselves to my heart without any form of antagonism? Alas! I could not say that. Al! I could do was to close my heart for the present. Meantime I did not disguise from myself that the more I saw of Mimi the more she grew into my soul.

X.

STRANGE MEANING OF A PISTOL-SHOT.

My week of absence from The Quarries seemed to me an eternity. I had seen no one from there; had heard nothing. As when we go away from home we imagine that some change or other must have happened at the old place, so I was now desirous to return to The Quarries to assure myself that naught had gone amiss. What, for instance, if I had been impudent in persuading Gaisso to go back to The Quarries? What if she had met with trouble or danger again?

But all smiled to me as I entered the gate. The spring sun was out. Not a speck of last week's snow remained. A crocus, which I plucked at the foot of an old crumbling wall, I attached to my button-hole as a good omen.

I found the house all astir with preparation. Immense quantities of linen and clothes were being made up for Bonair, who, contemplating a five years' absence in the Indian country, wished to be well supplied during the whole of that time. Ory worked most cheerfully. Toinette, too, was there—it was the first time I had ever seen her in the house—and she had most of the sewing to do, for, as I learned, she was an extraordinary needle. Gaisso was not visible, but I had not been long in the house when she stole up to me with a troubled face, and informed me that Bonair desired to see me in his room.

"He has something particular to tell you," she said in an almost inaudible whisper, and her look was such that I believed she suspected the object of the conference.

I found Bonair in his private apartment. He was in slippers and shirt-sleeves, with a red silk handkerchief wound about his head. The room was in disorder, the bed tossed, articles of dress were spread on chairs and on the carpet. On a little writing-table lay a mass of papers, flanked to the left by a large pipe, to the right by a horse-pistol. As soon as he had received me and offered me a chair, he closed the door with lock and bolt, then dropped the blinds at each of the windows, so as to leave only a faint light in the room.

"Carey Gilbert," said he, returning to his seat before the little table, "you are the very person I wanted to see. If you had not come, I was about to go to you myself. I am in an awful state of perplexity. I am about to take a decisive step, pronounce finally on a terrible question. I have consulted nobody. I desire no man's advice, except yours. You must be aware that the hour of my departure to the mountains is fast approaching. I had intended not to leave before the middle of April, but am now resolved to do so at the end of March. It is to-day Tuesday. I start Monday morning next."

I expressed my surprise at this, not having previously been informed of it.

"Yes, I leave The Quarries on next Monday, and God only knows when I will see it again. My own impression is that I will never return. I have settled every point but one, and that is the one on which I wish to consult you. You probably suspect what that is."

"I do, Bonair Paladine," I replied with firmness. "But I believe you can decide that without advice from me. I am not averse to give you any counsel or assistance in my power, but in such a matter I had hoped you would see your way clear without having to deliberate about it."

"So did I hope up till the last moment. I thought I could cut that question short by a decisive act of the will, as I had done others. The bother it has cost me, the threats that have been uttered, the dangers that have been thrown around me, the tears that have been shed, the supplications that have been made, the sorrow and the resentments that it has brought into this house I made light of in the confidence that at the moment of my departure one word of mine, firm, sharp, inexorable, would scatter all that mischief to the winds. Ah! sir, what an illusion. How blind we are when we believe our sight is the sharpest. How weak when we imagine we have the might of Titans. The struggle that has gone on within me since this morning, when I first faced the question in earnest, is something incredible. My head on one side; my heart on the other. I thought I had no heart left; I fear now that I have too much."

All this was spoken with the rapidity as of a torrent, with magnificent sweep of hand and eyes that rolled in the grand light of passion.

I said nothing, and he resumed:

"You are calm, disinterested, impartial. You are a young man like myself and can understand my position. As my friend and benefactor, you will tell me exactly what you think and tell it as plainly, as forcibly as you can. Of course, you know all my former relations with Gaisso."

"Yes."

"Have you ever reflected how you would act toward her, if you were in my place?"

"Yes, I have."

"Ah! you have, indeed," he exclaimed with a kind of sarcastic surprise which displeased me. I immediately explained:

"This matter has been forced upon my attention at different times and by different per-